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14. ABSTRACT Emerging links between the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Philippine militant organizations, particularly the Abu Sayyaf Group, pose a serious risk to global security, and the United States must leverage all the instruments of national power to address the threat. For several years, analysts have been concerned about growing ties between terrorist groups operating in the Southern Philippines and the Islamic State. As an international coalition continues to apply military pressure against jihadist strongholds in Iraq and Syria, ISIS will seek new safe havens and revenue streams to support their goal of global jihad. The recent seizure of Marawi City by Islamic insurgents demonstrates the growing financial resources, compelling narrative, and military capability of these rebel groups. Left unchecked, the densely forested and predominantly Muslim regions in the Southern Philippines offer the ideal conditions for the second incarnation of an ISIS caliphate. Unfortunately, the unpredictable leadership style of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte complicates the strategic situation in the region. As a result, the United States must seek innovative strategies for employing the diplomatic, economic and information instruments of power, while assisting the Philippine military in their struggle against militant groups.		
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**Insurgency and Terrorism in the Philippines: A New Front in the War Against Islamist Extremists**

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College Newport, RI in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

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## **Abstract**

### *Insurgency and Terrorism in the Philippines: A New Front in the War Against Islamist Extremists.*

Emerging links between the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Philippine militant organizations, particularly the Abu Sayyaf Group, pose a serious risk to global security, and the United States must leverage all the instruments of national power to address the threat. For several years, analysts have been concerned about growing ties between terrorist groups operating in the Southern Philippines and the Islamic State. As an international coalition continues to apply military pressure against jihadist strongholds in Iraq and Syria, ISIS will seek new safe havens and revenue streams to support their goal of global jihad. The recent seizure of Marawi City by Islamic insurgents demonstrates the growing financial resources, compelling narrative, and military capability of these rebel groups. Left unchecked, the densely forested and predominantly Muslim regions in the Southern Philippines offer the ideal conditions for the second incarnation of an ISIS caliphate. Unfortunately, the unpredictable leadership style of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte complicates the strategic situation in the region. As a result, the United States must seek innovative strategies for employing the diplomatic, economic and information instruments of power, while assisting the Philippine military in their struggle against militant groups.

## Introduction

For years, various terrorist organizations have been operating in the largely-autonomous regions of the Southern Philippines. Although the international community often viewed these groups as unaffiliated bandits with a loosely-structured Islamist separatist agenda, recent ties to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are cause for international concern. In the past year, several Islamist militant organizations, including various factions of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), have pledged their loyalty to ISIS and leveraged that relationship to launch attacks in the southern Philippines. The capture of Marawi City by Islamist insurgents in May 2017 demonstrated the growing financial resources, ideological power, and military capability of these rebel groups. The seizure and subsequent siege of Marawi forced government officials to declare a state of martial law in the Mindanao region that will last through the end of 2017, a tactic that the Philippine government has not employed since the dark days of the oppressive Marcos regime.<sup>1</sup> Although the Philippine government eventually liberated the city after an intense five month operation, the audacity and military might of the ISIS-backed rebels caused many local media experts to conclude that “the likelihood that Marawi will become a base for ISIS is very, very high,”<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, ISIS’s base of support in the Middle East has been eroding under military pressure from a massive international coalition, a situation that has forced them to consider establishing a geographic foothold elsewhere. ISIS reached the peak of their power in 2014, when they controlled large sections of Iraq and Syria, including strongholds in Mosul and Tikrit. But in the past two years, ISIS lost more than 29,000 square kilometers of ground, and their regionally-dominant military was forced into a limited unconventional

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<sup>1</sup> Santos, “How Two Brothers Took Over a Filipino City for ISIS.”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

struggle.<sup>3</sup> As the international coalition continues to force ISIS from safe havens in the Middle East, it will be forced to seek new refuges and revenue streams. To remain relevant, ISIS must establish a new base of operations.

The heavily forested and predominantly Muslim regions in the Southern Philippines offer the ideal conditions for ISIS to team with sympathetic organizations, such as ASG, to form a new caliphate. ASG traditionally recruited disenfranchised youths, gang members, recently-released prisoners and, other at-risk elements of the population.<sup>4</sup> Employing textbook insurgent tactics, ASG rebels blended into Mindanao's rugged terrain to evade military and law enforcement personnel, who were often trained and supported by US Special Forces. By associating themselves with ISIS, ASG can now fortify their numbers with a steady stream of recruits who lack the financial resources to travel to the Middle East and seasoned fighters returning from the battlefield in Syria.<sup>5</sup> This partnership enabled the recent attack on Marawi City and presaged a deadly new front in the war on Islamist terrorism. ASG's newfound ability to take and hold ground, coupled with their recently-stated desire to establish an Islamist caliphate in the Philippines, changes the nature of their operation from criminal activity to something closer to an insurgency or revolutionary warfare.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Emerging Threat**

The Southern Philippines has a history of rebellion, guerrilla warfare, and religious conflict that stretches back to the Spanish colonial era of the late 1800s.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the rest of

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<sup>3</sup> "History," Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, Updated 31July, 2017, [http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/HISTORY\\_17OCT2014-JUL2017.pdf?ver=2017-07-22-095806-793](http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/HISTORY_17OCT2014-JUL2017.pdf?ver=2017-07-22-095806-793).

<sup>4</sup> "Southeast Asia could be haven for displaced ISIS fighters," *The Washington Post (Online)*, August 18, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Iho, "Islamic State Accepts Pledge of Allegiance from Philippine Militants," 4.

<sup>6</sup> Fall, "The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," 3.

<sup>7</sup> Rivera, "U.S.-Philippines Cooperation on Terrorism," 10.

the Philippines, which is predominantly Catholic, the southern portion of the country is autonomously governed and mostly Muslim. Several Islamist separatist groups formed in the Southern Philippines during the 1970s, in response to Ferdinand Marcos' extended period of martial law. Chief among them was the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the precursor to both the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)<sup>8</sup>. It is difficult to discern the organization or ideology of the separatist groups in the Mindanao region. They were traditionally characterized as a “dark network” of temporary partnerships between like-minded individuals, rather than static, permanent, well-structured organizations.<sup>9</sup> In their comprehensive analysis, Ugarte and Turner argue that the media tends to refer to any and all terrorists in the region as ASG members, when the actual allegiances of many militants are complicated and transitory.<sup>10</sup> The shadowy nature of these organizations has complicated efforts to fully understand their motivation, leadership, and funding sources. This ambiguity has made it difficult for government forces to combat them.

ISIS and ASG espouse similar fundamentalist ideologies, and both organizations are focused on establishing an Islamist caliphate. ASG, the most prominent group currently operating in the Philippines, has been in existence in its current form since the early 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Originally formed by the Muslim cleric, Ustadz Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, ASG's stated goal is to establish a Muslim theocracy in the Southern Philippines.<sup>12</sup> ISIS emerged as an international threat in 2013 after seizing large swaths of land from politically areas in Iraq and Syria. Fueled by a fanatical ideology, ISIS fighters committed untold atrocities as they laid

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<sup>8</sup> Rivera, "U.S.-Philippines Cooperation on Terrorism," 27.

<sup>9</sup> Ugarte and Turner, "What is the 'Abu Sayyaf'?" 410.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 412.

<sup>11</sup> Guerrero, "Philippine Terrorism and Insurgency," 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15.

claim to over 100,000 square kilometers of land, including the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit.<sup>13</sup> Viewing itself as a sovereign nation, ISIS proclaimed its intent to establish an Islamist caliphate in the Levant. Given their nearly identical objectives, ASG and ISIS are natural partners, separated only by the distance between their areas of strength. Their recent partnership benefits both organizations in many ways.

By accepting a pledge of fealty from a geographically and ethnically diverse separatist group based thousands of miles away, ISIS gained prestige with potential recruits around the globe. At the same time, ASG is poised to provide ISIS with a steady income stream derived from its robust network of criminal enterprises and a new redoubt in Southeast Asia not under siege by coalition forces. Often perceived as a loosely-organized band of criminals, ASG gained moral credibility and a coherent narrative by solidifying their relationship with the self-declared international Islamist caliphate. The cooperation between ISIS and Islamist extremists in the Philippines strengthens both organizations and poses a serious risk to global security.

Through this new partnership, ISIS stands to benefit from ASG's ability to generate a steady stream of criminally-generated revenue. Historically, ASG has funded its activities through extortion and a complex system of extra-judiciary taxes levied on residents in areas under the group's control.<sup>14</sup> For a time, al-Qaeda also funneled money to ASG through a disreputable charitable organization.<sup>15</sup> Since the mid-1990s ASG developed an affinity and skill for executing kidnappings; from 1992 to 2008, ASG raised more than \$35 million in

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<sup>13</sup> "History," Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, Updated 31July, 2017, [http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/HISTORY\\_17OCT2014-JUL2017.pdf?ver=2017-07-22-095806-793](http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/HISTORY_17OCT2014-JUL2017.pdf?ver=2017-07-22-095806-793).

<sup>14</sup> Guerrero, "Philippine Terrorism and Insurgency," 19.

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien, "Fluctuations Between Crime and Terror," 324.

ransom money.<sup>16</sup> Although ASG generated most of this income by ransoming locals in the Mindanao region, they also carried out several high-profile kidnappings that elevated their notoriety and produced lucrative ransom payments. For example, in 2009 ASG garnered international attention by abducting three Red Cross workers, an act that forced the Red Cross to stop sending representatives into the region.<sup>17</sup> When Philippines law enforcement officials backed by US Special Forces intensified their efforts against hostage-taking, ASG branched out into other illegal enterprises, including narcotics trafficking. This ability to raise money through criminal ventures makes ASG a desirable partner for other terrorist organizations, including ISIS.

Distancing themselves from their reputation as disorganized bandits and thugs, ASG seized upon ISIS's strategic vision and re-invented themselves as ideologically-motivated Islamist freedom fighters. In the past year, several militant groups, including various factions of ASG, have pledged their loyalty to ISIS and leveraged that relationship to launch attacks. Most notably, separatists with ties to ISIS and ASG overran Marawi City after the military attempted to arrest a local ASG leader.<sup>18</sup> The rebels laid claim to the town, forcing Philippine President Duterte to declare martial law throughout the region while deploying military units to lay siege to the city. During months of combat, almost half a million civilians were forced to leave the area, and up to 500 people lost their lives.<sup>19</sup> The protracted stalemate forced Duterte to launch airstrikes that demolished large sections of the city and extend the period of martial law through the end of the year.<sup>20</sup> Although troops eventually forced the

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<sup>16</sup> O'Brien, "Fluctuations Between Crime and Terror," 321.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>18</sup> Santos, "How Two Brothers Took Over a Filipino City for ISIS."

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Gotinga, "Some Locals Question Marawi Shelling."

militants to withdraw after five months of intense combat, Duterte's heavy-handed tactics are likely to escalate tensions in the region, and residents of Marawi City are already wary of another insurgent offensive.<sup>21</sup>

Limited access to the remote areas of Mindanao has hampered government attempts to establish sovereignty for decades, and the region remains a viable locale for a terrorist center of operations. The geographic conditions in the Southern Philippines are nearly optimal for camouflaging insurgents, especially when contrasted with the desert and urban settings ISIS faced in Iraq and Syria. Geography and terrain are often critical factors in determining the success of an insurgency. Noted terrorism and insurgency expert Bard O'Neill notes, “Rugged terrain – vast mountains, jungles, swamps, forests, and the like - is usually related to successful guerrilla operations because it hinders movement by government troops and provides inaccessible hideouts for the guerrillas’ main bases.”<sup>22</sup> Establishing semi-permanent bases in areas free from government intervention allows potential insurgents to, “plan, train, rest, recuperate, marshal equipment, and organize the people in relative security.”<sup>23</sup> The mountains in the Southern Philippines are covered with dense jungle, providing exceptional concealment for ASG and ISIS operatives.

In addition to favorable terrain, the area is home to a populace well-suited for generating an Islamist terrorist movement. The population is impoverished, predominantly Muslim, and has some of the lowest literacy rates in the Philippines.<sup>24</sup> Decades of conflict left

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<sup>21</sup> Chao, “The Battle for Marawi.”

<sup>22</sup> O’Neill, “Insurgency & Terrorism,” 72.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>24</sup> Guerrero, “Philippine Terrorism and Insurgency,” 29-30.

the region with little industry, and ASG has campaigned aggressively to intimidate non-Islamist teachers from educating the population. As a result, most families in Mindanao live below the poverty line.<sup>25</sup> This combination of social dynamics, especially the presence of prolonged economic hardship, increases the likelihood of a sustained insurgency. As counterinsurgency expert Bard O’Neill reminds us, “even a cursory look at insurrections makes clear, in most cases, economic factors of one sort or another do in fact play a key part in the outbreak and endurance of political violence.”<sup>26</sup> Realizing the potential to recruit insurgents, ISIS released a propaganda video in 2016 that urged jihadists in Southeast Asia to join a newly formed battalion in Mindanao, rather than travel to Syria or Iraq.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, as the ISIS footprint in Iraq and Syria grows smaller, militants who traveled to the Middle East to fight for the Islamic State are returning to their homes in Southeast Asia. Since 2015, more than 1,000 fighters have returned from the battlefields in Iraq and Syria.<sup>28</sup> Australian security experts fear that these returning battle-hardened jihadists will assume leadership roles in the ASG organization and provide the necessary catalyst for more widespread violence and terrorism.<sup>29</sup> Bard O’Neill echoes this concern when he warns that “the existence of intellectual leadership is necessary for an insurgency’s success because it provides strategic vision, organizational know-how, and technical competence.”<sup>30</sup> He notes that insurgencies without a dedicated cadre of intellectual leaders rarely rise above the level of peasant uprisings.<sup>31</sup> The radicals returning from Iraq and Syria have already demonstrated

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<sup>25</sup> Guerrero, “Philippine Terrorism and Insurgency,” 30.

<sup>26</sup> O’Neill, “Insurgency & Terrorism,” 81.

<sup>27</sup> “Terrorism Expert Warns of Islamic State battalion in the Philippines,” *Asia News Monitor*, 13 July, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> “Southeast Asia could be haven for displaced ISIS fighters,” *The Washington Post (Online)*, August 18, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> “Southeast Asia could be haven for displaced ISIS fighters,” *The Washington Post (Online)*, August 18, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> O’Neill, “Insurgency & Terrorism,” 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

their commitment to establishing a caliphate, and their combat experience makes them exceptional candidates for leadership roles in the emerging Philippine insurgency.

Collectively, these indicators point to the high likelihood of an ISIS-like insurrection in the Southern Philippines. Civil unrest has smoldered for decades, but until recently ASG lacked the vision and discipline to achieve their strategic goal of launching a full-fledged insurgency to capture land and form a caliphate. The burgeoning partnership between ISIS and ASG threatens to transform this conflict, which has so far been contained in the Philippines, into a full-scale revolution with global implications. Desperately seeking a second front in their effort to establish a base of operations, ISIS fighters are poised to leverage ASG's ability to seize territory and raise funds through criminal enterprises, including kidnapping, narcotics trafficking, and high jacking, to establish reliable revenue streams in the southern Philippines. This financial support, coupled with a steady stream of fighters returning from the battlefields of Iraq and Syria and the global ambitions of ISIS leadership, creates an optimal environment for launching international terrorist attacks from the Philippines.

### **Counter-argument**

Some may argue that ASG and associated groups are simply a regional problem, best left to the Philippine government. Proponents of this argument would point to the fact that Islamist separatists have been present in Mindanao for almost 150 years, and ASG, in particular, has been active in the region since 1991.<sup>32</sup> Despite this long history of violence, critics would note that the conflict has never spilled over regional borders, and extremists from Southeast Asia have rarely been involved in global terror plots.<sup>33</sup> They might suggest that it

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<sup>32</sup> Rivera, "U.S.-Philippines Cooperation on Terrorism," ii.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 66.

would be best to allow the Philippine government to deal with the issue without US involvement.

However, the meteoric rise of the Islamic State from relative obscurity to a deadly sponsor and inspiration for international terror highlights the risk of ignoring smoldering regional threats in the age of globalism. Prior to 2014, few would have imagined that ISIS would be capable of seizing and holding more than 100,000 square kilometers of territory in Iraq and Syria.<sup>34</sup> When President Barrack Obama infamously referred to ISIS as the “JV team” in January of 2014, it highlighted the global underestimation of the threat.<sup>35</sup> Less than one month later, ISIS laid claim to the Iraqi city of Falluja.<sup>36</sup> Recent developments suggest that the Mindanao region might be headed toward a similar explosion in insurgent activity.

For want of a unifying cause, the violence on Mindanao has historically been contained within the region. However, by partnering with ISIS, ASG seized upon a proven narrative to catalyze long-standing grievances into a full-blown insurgency. Joint doctrine defines insurgency as, “the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region.”<sup>37</sup> The root causes of insurgency are opportunity, means, and motive.<sup>38</sup> For decades, ASG accumulated funds through criminal enterprises without interference from the central government, but they lacked a central theme that resonated with the marginalized population. By proclaiming fealty to ISIS, ASG adopted the narrative that inspired disenfranchised Islamists from around the world to travel to the battlefields of Iraq

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<sup>34</sup> “History,” Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, Updated 31July, 2017, [http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/HISTORY\\_17OCT2014-JUL2017.pdf?ver=2017-07-22-095806-793](http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/HISTORY_17OCT2014-JUL2017.pdf?ver=2017-07-22-095806-793).

<sup>35</sup> Sinha, “Obama’s Evolution on ISIS.”

<sup>36</sup> Sinha, “Obama’s Evolution on ISIS.”

<sup>37</sup> JP 3-24, I-1.

<sup>38</sup> JP 3-24, II-3.

and Syria. ISIS's identity and ideology will enable ASG to manipulate the existing grievances of Mindanao's predominantly Muslim population, providing the catalyst for an organized insurgent campaign. Given the pre-existing conditions on Mindanao that favor the emergence of an insurrection, it would be unwise to assume that a similar eruption of violence could not occur in the Philippines. ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks eventually forced the United States and its allies to conduct costly and dangerous military operations, followed by a lengthy counterinsurgency campaign. It is much less complicated to deal with terrorist organizations in their infancy, before they become a potent threat to the homeland.

### **The Way Ahead**

Developing a comprehensive strategy to address the emerging threat of insurgency is beyond the scope of this research paper. However, as a long-standing ally of the Philippines, the United States could play a critical role defending against an ISIS-like explosion of extremism in the region. The following themes, which involve diplomatic, information, military, and economic lines of effort, merit consideration.

Although it is tempting to recommend a purely kinetic military strategy for eradicating ASG, Counter Insurgency (COIN) doctrine suggests a more nuanced approach. In most successful COIN campaigns, the military played a relatively small role in relation to political, information, and economic aspects. As COIN expert Bernard B. Fall states, “everybody, of course, by definition will seek a military solution to the problem, whereas by its very nature, the insurgency problem is military only in a secondary sense and political, ideological and administrative in a primary sense.”<sup>39</sup> Every COIN effort is unique, and defeating a trans-national terrorist organization attempting to establish a foothold in an autonomous region of a

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<sup>39</sup> Fall, “The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency,” 4.

country governed by a belligerent strongman is no exception. Given the complicated situation, the United States should employ all the elements of national power to help the Philippines suppress ASG.

The complex political environment in the Philippines will affect any American efforts to address the threat of Islamist extremism emanating from the Mindanao region, as all diplomatic, information, military, and economic efforts in foreign countries hinge upon the cooperation of the host government. The election of President Duterte, a man with a reputation for brutal tactics including extra-judicial killings, complicates the prospect of bilateral cooperation.

Duterte's long history of animosity toward the United States, punctuated by a particular distaste for the Obama administration, presents a complex set of diplomatic challenges.<sup>40</sup> To play to his populist base, amongst whom he remains very popular, Duterte repeatedly expressed disdain for President Obama, often using extremely colorful language. Although the election of President Trump seemed to open up the possibility of renewed collaboration, Duterte's mercurial leadership style jeopardizes the viability of continued military cooperation with the United States. On a number of occasions, he has threatened to cancel joint military exercises or even withdraw from a long-standing mutual defense treaty.<sup>41</sup> As a result, the United States will be compelled to explore innovative strategies for employing its instruments of power, while continuing to seek opportunities to support and guide the Philippines' military campaign against ASG.

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<sup>40</sup> Simon and Baker, "Philippine Follies," *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 3 (2017): 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

The most important goal of the COIN effort will be undermining ASG's central narrative: that the United States and its allies are waging war against Islam. Debriefs with radicalized extremists suggest that a core element of the jihadist proposition is the notion that the Muslim world is fighting for survival against the United States and its allies.<sup>42</sup> Although ISIS is gambling that this narrative will resonate with the predominantly Muslim population of the Mindanao region, the United States enjoys a favorability rating of over 92 percent throughout the Philippines.<sup>43</sup> This approval stems from the financial assistance and military partnerships that have existed since the end of the Second World War. The United States could capitalize on this perception to advance an alternative narrative: the Americans are working with the government of the Philippines to defeat ASG and like-minded terrorists, thus ensuring security throughout the region.

Message discipline is critical to a successful information operation. Any indiscretion, even at the tactical level, can adversely impact perceptions with long-lasting implications. ASG's propaganda machine will utilize misstatements, especially those uttered by senior elected officials, as evidence to reinforce their position. For example, when President Trump repeatedly referred to a discredited story about General John Pershing using ammunition dipped in pig's blood to dispatch Islamist militants during the Moro rebellion, it seriously undermined the American narrative.<sup>44</sup> As Massachusetts Institute of Technology history pro-

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<sup>42</sup> Ramakrishna, "The Growth of ISIS Extremism in Southeast Asia," *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Simon and Baker, "Philippine Follies," *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 3 (2017): 33.

<sup>44</sup> Reily, Katie, President Trump Praises Fake Story About Shooting Muslims With Pig's Blood-Soaked Bullets, *Time*, August 17, 2017

fessor Christopher Capozzola noted, Trump's praise of an alleged 20<sup>th</sup>-century atrocity appeared to be a "deliberate effort to offend Filipino's religious sensibilities."<sup>45</sup> This type of miscalculation is extremely detrimental to the overall strategic effort.

In addition to winning the war of information, the United States is well-positioned to help the government of the Philippines address the incredible economic distress that permeates the Mindanao region. Extreme poverty is one of the factors that insurgents prey upon in order to recruit disciples.<sup>46</sup> Mindanao is one of the most impoverished areas in the country, with high rates of illiteracy, short life expectancies, and pervasive unemployment.<sup>47</sup> Historically, more than half the families in the Mindanao region subsist below the poverty line.<sup>48</sup> Although the United States provided over \$120 million in economic aid to the Philippines in 2016, an increase of 154 percent over the previous year, it is difficult to determine how that money was actually allocated.<sup>49</sup> To reinforce the desired narrative, future assistance should be targeted at measures that improve the financial situation in Mindanao.

Although not the main line of effort, the US military also has a role to play in defeating the ASG insurgency. The United States and the Philippines have enjoyed a long and mostly successful military partnership against extremist forces in the Mindanao region. For the past sixteen years, American military personnel worked with local partners in a coordinated effort to eradicate separatist groups through Operation Enduring Freedom - Philippines (OEF-P).<sup>50</sup> Although OEF-P succeeded in reducing the level of violence and curbed the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> O'Neill, "Insurgency & Terrorism," 81.

<sup>47</sup> Turner, Mark, "Terrorism and Secession in the Southern Philippines," 12.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>49</sup> Simon and Baker, "Philippine Follies," *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 3 (2017): 33.

<sup>50</sup> Robinson et al, "U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines," 1.

threat of international terrorism springing from the region, military force alone has not eliminated support for ASG or their peers. Despite a record of operational success, President Duterte made several comments about his desire to terminate the military partnership between the two nations. These threats reached their peak in December 2017, when he informed the world that America should "prepare to leave the Philippines, prepare for the eventual repeal or the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement."<sup>51</sup> Even though his aides subsequently walked back these threats, at the heart of Duterte's resentment was a general sense that the United Staets had historically treated the Philippines as a colony rather than partner.<sup>52</sup> His dim view of America makes it unlikely that he would approve expanded bilateral military cooperation in the immediate future. Even if a massive intervention was politically possible, experience has shown that a sizeable and persistent American military presence would likely alienate the indigenous population and undermine the legitimacy of the counterinsurgency effort.<sup>53</sup>

The United States should maximize the effectiveness of existing military arrangements, while capitalizing on opportunities to demonstrate its commitment to security cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). During the final years of his administration, Obama made a conscious pivot towards Asia. Former Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter, highlighted this commitment when he told a gathering of ASEAN military commanders, "The U.S. will continue to sharpen our military edge so we remain the most

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<sup>51</sup> Simon and Baker, "Philippine Follies," *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 3 (2017): 33.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Tuck, "The 'Practice' Problem: Peacebuilding and Doctrine," 75.

powerful military in the region and the security partner of choice.”<sup>54</sup> Working through partner nations and regional alliances increases the legitimacy of any intervention and supports the narrative that Americans are attempting to enhance global security, not establish colonies.

In the instances where direct military intervention is necessary, the United States would be best served by minimizing its military footprint. Given their expertise with counterterrorism and long-standing relationship with the Philippines military, Special Operations Forces are ideally suited for the Mindanao operating environment. Throughout OEF-P, Special Operators trained and advised Philippine Security Forces and conducted limited foreign internal defense and information operations.<sup>55</sup> The United States provided this assistance through an agreement with the Philippine government that prohibited US forces from engaging in direct combat operations.<sup>56</sup> Although the tenuous political situation makes expanded military operations unlikely, increased use of American airborne surveillance assets would doubtlessly improve the efficacy of Philippine ground forces. And should the political situation improve, relaxing the terms of the agreement to permit limited direct engagement, without expanding the size of the overall footprint, would allow American forces to conduct raids, independently or in conjunction with Philippine forces. American forces could potentially be employed to rescue hostages, capture high-value targets for debriefing, and seize contraband. All of these functions could be completed without deploying a larger force package, which might alienate our allies in the region or the indigenous population.

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<sup>54</sup> Simon and Baker, “Philippine Follies,” *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 3 (2017): 33.

<sup>55</sup> Robinson et al, “U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines,” xiii.

<sup>56</sup> Robinson et al, “U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines,” xiii.

## Conclusions

The emerging links between ISIS and ASG in the Southern Philippines presage a new front in the war on violent extremist organizations and pose a serious threat to global security. When ASG demonstrated its ability to seize Marawi City and hold terrain, it signaled a significant change in tactics and a dramatic increase in military capability. ASG appears to be adopting a more ISIS-like agenda with an expanded vision for an Islamist caliphate. The growing insurgency in the Southern Philippines, which couples ISIS' proven narrative and strategic vision with a new source of resources and an established base of operations, could cast the entire region into conflict. Similar to the situation in Iraq and Syria in 2014, a new caliphate is poised to emerge from the lawless jungles of Mindanao. This new front could serve as a base of operations for global terror strikes with grave international security implications.

Although ASG is rapidly emerging as a regional and global threat, it is still possible to intervene without a large, lengthy, and costly military deployment. To do so, the United States should attempt to make inroads with President Duterte to expand counter-terror relationships. The United States should also embark on a comprehensive information campaign to convince the indigenous population of Mindanao that the Philippine government represents the only path to regional security. To reinforce this line of effort, the United States should be prepared to supply economic for infrastructure improvement, humanitarian relief, and security. Special Operations Forces should lead the American effort to advise and assist the Philippines Defense Force without usurping the Filipinos' status as the primary actor in the struggle. Where possible, the US government attempt to expand agreements and rules of engagement, to bring American airborne surveillance assets into the fold. Addressing this

insurgency in its infancy, before it explodes into a global crisis, is preferable to waging a new war against an Islamist caliphate that sponsors global terrorism.

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